

Speak Up and Listen

Speaking and listening are vital skills for learning to think, but they are difficult and time consuming to teach.

By Terry Roberts and Laura Billings

“Without communication, there can be no community.”

—Mortimer Adler

Not long ago, we spent the day in a K-8 public school in a small New England city. As part of our work, we met with teachers in grade-level groups to discuss their implementation of seminar discussion in their classrooms. In session after session, the teachers responded to our suggestions by saying that the texts we had provided were too hard and the conversations we proposed were beyond the ability of their students. At the end of the day, we facilitated a demonstration seminar with approximately 20 first grade students, who were restless to the point of being out of control. The seminar “text” was the 12-inch ruler, which the students practiced using to draw straight lines and measure objects prior to the seminar, where they discussed the idea of measurement.

In ever so many ways, this day is profoundly representative of our work with contemporary schools. Increasingly, the students we work with—including middle and high school

students—have little or no experience with discussing ideas. In the same vein, the teachers we work with often sadly underestimate their students’ potential ability to think critically. Just as unfortunately, too many educators fail to see the importance of teaching basic communication skills—speaking and listening—on anything like a consistent basis. The single-minded focus on standardized testing that has infiltrated almost every corner of American public education has pushed out everything that is not tested, including those skills that are at the very heart of learning to learn and learning to think. It is all the more ironic, then, that speaking and listening are 21st Century survival skills—both for their own sake and as a medium for critical thinking.

For all these reasons, it is now more important than ever that

we teach the ability to speak and listen critically—to all students across all subject areas. In the volatile, global environment of the 21st century, being able to communicate successfully is the key to employment, to citizenship, and to a quality life. The **Partnership for 21st**



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Century Skills—a coalition of American businesses with an international focus, funded in part by the U.S. Department of Education—recently released “A Resource and Policy Guide” entitled *21st Century Skills, Education and Competitiveness*. In this Guide, the Partnership argued that “advanced 21st century skills ... are the indispensable currency for participation, achievement and competitiveness in the global economy.” The Guide lists six fundamental 21st century skills, including these three:

- **Thinking critically and making judgments**
- **Solving complex, multidisciplinary, open-ended problems**
- **Communicating and collaborating¹**

The authors conclude this passage with a powerful challenge to a public education system mesmerized by standardized, paper-and-pencil tests: “All Americans must be skilled at interacting competently and respectfully with others.”

As teachers, we are left with the question of whether it is possible to teach competent and respectful interaction. The first step in answering the challenge is to understand how the 21st Century skills described here are related. Certainly, experience suggests a synergistic relationship between the ability to communicate and the ability to think critically in order to solve problems. Often, an individual’s thinking gains coherence and clarity only through expression—most often through dialogue with others.

¹ For the full report as well as late breaking policy news on this front, visit the Partnership’s web site at www.21stcenturyskills.org.

Listening well, like speaking well, is also a thoughtful act. When you listen closely to someone else’s statement, you first “hear” what he or she says, simply breaking down and decoding the surface meaning of the words, phrases, and sentences. There is also a deeper level to listening, a level that we might call listening as thinking. In the case of more complex statements, you must analyze what you’ve been told, struggling with a kind of listening for comprehension not unlike the reading for comprehension that gets so much attention in middle and high school language arts classes. Further, if you hope to truly share your partner’s thoughts, you have to work at listening empathetically with as few of your own prejudices at work as possible. Thankfully, in conversation, unlike reading, you can check for understanding almost immediately by paraphrasing what you think you’ve heard or by asking a follow-up question, something that good listeners do constantly as they work toward understanding.

Obviously, when done well, speaking and listening are more immediately collaborative than reading and writing and require a kind of proactive partnership, even when those involved discover that they disagree with each other. Thus, in the give and take of conversation, simple thoughts become more complex through the interaction of one mind with another. And when two or more minds cooperate in shared dialogue, a more sophisticated understanding of curricular concepts is almost always the result. In order to teach the fundamental ideas in math, science, social studies, and the arts, we have to teach students how to converse about math, science, social studies, and the arts.

The simple lesson that teachers sometimes forget is that learning to communicate *is* learning to think.

One of the reasons we have forgotten this important truth is that the ability to speak and listen well is both difficult and time consuming to teach. Indeed, as the philosopher-educator Mortimer Adler pointed out in the Prologue to his 1983 book *How to Speak, How to Listen*, these fundamental liberal arts are more difficult to learn than the complementary skills of reading and writing. “The reason why,” according to Adler, “is that speaking and listening differ in remarkable ways from writing and reading . . . because speaking and listening are transient and fleeting, . . . as writing and reading are not” (8, 9). In sum, unless you are composing a formal speech, you don’t have the chance to prepare multiple drafts of a spoken communication. Rather, you must speak clearly and coherently enough to be understood at once, upon one hearing alone; similarly, in listening, you have the opportunity to hear a spoken message only once and must grasp it immediately if at all (unless your partner is kind enough to repeat him or herself). As either speaker or listener, you get no second chance as you do in reading and writing.

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As hard as it is to learn to speak and listen well, these two skills are the key to learning to think. In recent years at the National Paideia Center, we have struggled with how to teach thinking consistently and effectively. In doing so, we have come to define *thinking* as the

ability to explain and manipulate complex systems successfully, and *learning to think* as explaining and manipulating increasingly complex systems. By *increasingly complex*, we mean systems containing larger numbers of discrete elements and more complex relationships between and among those elements.² Following this definition, a complex math word problem is a system, a scene from *Romeo and Juliet* is a system, and the United States Constitution is a very complex system. These examples illustrate how systems become more complex the more ideas and values they invoke. In discussing any of these systems in detail, we are forced to explain and manipulate the ideas within the system and, eventually, articulate what the system says about those ideas. Through conversation, our thinking grows more sophisticated and inclusive as well as more clear and coherent. Through conversation, we can reconcile apparent contradictions and, in time, include a variety of points of view. Learning to speak and listen—the art of conversation—is a function of deliberate practice, not personality or gender or even formal performance. Like writing, conversation requires constant and ongoing practice. And like writing, it is directly tied to the ability to think clearly, coherently, and flexibly.

Because both speaking and listening are a form of collaborative thinking, they should be taught as a way of addressing the ideas and values in the curriculum. During the transition from inner speech (what we typically call “thinking”) to external speech (when we say the words), we organize our stray thoughts

into more-or-less coherent statements. Then, in the give and take of conversation, we compare, contrast, merge our thoughts with those of others, so that a larger, more inclusive understanding emerges—a kind of intellectual synthesis. This is how conversation is directly connected to critical thinking in general and problem solving in particular. This is also how we learn complex subjects, including the conceptual part of any standardized curriculum. In order to think clearly about math or science, history or poetry, we need consistent practice in talking about those subjects and in hearing others talk about them.

Conversations That Teach

What sorts of conversation, then, are most educative? In response to this question, we will examine two types of instructional conversation. The first type of conversation is *Socratic*, teacher-centered discussion, and the second is the more *maieutic*, student-centered discussion. Both types challenge students to practice their speaking and listening skills; both teach critical thinking about the curriculum.

In order to clarify the difference between the two types, we need to define the terms *Socratic* and *maieutic* more specifically. We use *Socratic* to mean teaching by questioning when the teacher has a specific goal in mind and is asking questions designed to lead the student or students to a pre-determined point of view. As a result, Socratic questions tend to be relatively closed, meaning that there is only one desired response. On the other hand, *maieutic*—which is the Greek term for “midwifery”—means teaching by questioning when the teacher has as her goal helping students give birth to their own divergent ideas rather than mimic those of the teacher. As a result, maieutic questions are more open-ended,

meaning that there are many possible correct answers. Both types of conversation between a teacher and student(s) are valuable, but they have different goals and require different types of questions.

Socratic Conversations

The first type of instructional conversation is Socratic. The traditional tutorial (well known in many European educational systems) is the perfect example of a Socratic conversation between two individuals, one expert and one novice. The tutorial involves a master or tutor in formal conversation with a student. The two discuss a reading or readings, with the goal of raising the student’s level of understanding. At least part of the tutor’s goal is to sharpen the student’s thinking skills, both in general and with specific reference to the content at hand. The tutor often does this by asking a series of questions intended to reveal flaws in the student’s approach and to lead the student to deeper understanding, typically that point of view most widely held or that point of view championed by the tutor. For this reason, the tutor’s questions are not particularly open-ended and can, in some instances, turn into miniature lectures. We might agree that Socratic teaching or Socratic questioning, then, means teaching through dialogue with the goal of leading students to accept a specific, predetermined point of view. Its power comes from the fact that it exposes the student to models of clear, coherent thought, formulas that he or she needs to learn.

Teachers can and should build one-on-one student conferences into the flow of the classroom life, either during class while the other students are at work or during some other period of the day. This is especially important in middle and high school where students are often

² For a more in-depth discussion of literacy and thinking as we define the terms, see *Thinking is Literacy, Literacy Thinking* in the February 2008 issue of *Educational Leadership*.

lost in the crowd of larger classrooms, one among many. These conferences or tutorials should have a focus—such as a text the student has read closely or a sample of the student’s work—and they should have a protocol so that they don’t turn into miniature lectures. These one-on-one sessions are particularly valuable in helping reluctant speakers prepare for upcoming whole-group seminars. Assuming good rapport between teacher and student, these discussions can serve as a less stressful rehearsal for Socratic discussion in a whole-group setting.

Next, consider what happens when you extend Socratic conversation from a one-on-one tutorial to a teacher coaching a small group of students. The teacher’s

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role is to circulate and coach the subject-area skills being practiced. Collaborative grouping is also an excellent strategy for helping students practice speaking and listening skills in a setting that is not as intimidating as a whole-class discussion. As the teacher circulates from group to group, she can coach both content and process skills by asking Socratic questions and by addressing those questions to the less-active members of the group as a way of engaging them in the group conversation. In addition, teachers can and should ask students to self-assess not only how they performed in relation to the lesson’s content but also how well they as a group worked together.

As students become increasingly comfortable in classroom conversation,

it is easy to imagine the transition to a more active, more focused whole-group discussion, where you see a teacher leading a large group of students through Socratic questioning. The instructor is teaching by questioning, but it is obvious that he or she is still asking relatively closed questions, often with only one “right” answer, and the goal is to lead students to a preconceived set of insights. Done well, this type of classroom discussion is an important form of intellectual coaching. It is not the ideal in terms of teaching thinking—we will come to that shortly—but it does give the teacher a strategy for eliciting and guiding the development of student speech while working with a large group, and it gives students the practice they need both speaking and listening in a larger forum.

Socratic questioning—whether in a tutorial or whole-group discussion—is a powerful form of instruction that should be a part of any master teacher’s repertoire, but it does have its limitations. Because the teacher takes on the responsibility for controlling the direction of the conversation and generating the eventual insights, this form of conversation is neither truly synthetic (composed of the insights of both parties) nor truly creative. The results will be more-or-less the same thoughts the teacher has articulated before, only given lip service by the students.



Maieutic Conversations

The second type of instructional conversation is maieutic, in which the participants share the responsibility and power equally. In a maieutic conversation, the exchange is typically more free, more open, and more fluid; it is characterized by a steady exchange with the partners sharing the floor equally—as opposed to one speaker taking on the role of the expert while the other is the novice.

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In contrast to the tutorial this form of conversation is more synthetic in that both parties introduce important—if sometimes contradictory—insights, and it is their common work to articulate a system that can contain both points of view; in other words, to *synthesize* the thesis and antithesis that they have introduced. By the same token this form of one-on-one conversation is more creative than the tutorial because the resulting synthesis is new to both speakers and, in the best examples, truly unconventional in that it subsumes and extends the former convictions of both. On a practical level, once teachers have established a schedule and a protocol for engaging their students in individual conferences during the school year, they should deliberately shift the focus from Socratic to maieutic questions, treating the divergent ideas of their students more

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To learn more about dialogue in the classroom, consider joining the web-based professional network titled, "The Great Conversations" at www.greatconversation.ning.com.

seriously as the students gain confidence. This shift from more Socratic to more maieutic questions honors the student's growing ability to think critically about the concepts that shape the curriculum.

A second (and in some ways, more challenging) form of maieutic conversation in which students can learn to speak comfortably with others about ideas and values is in focused conversation with a small group of classmates where all involved are equals. In order to teach thoughtful speech in collaborative groups, students need to have a focus, an agenda, and the clear expectation of equal participation. Furthermore, teachers can and should coach student participation in collaborative groups, especially the quality of student communication. Students can use all of these settings to practice speaking loudly enough to be heard and clearly enough to be understood while making eye contact with the listener. In the same settings, students can practice listening with a deliberate focus and intensity, looking at the speaker, asking questions, and taking notes on the insights of others.

Experienced teachers often use pairs within a larger seminar structure, deliberately seating participants with partners who will balance out their typical seminar behaviors. The facilitator will then ask several "paired" questions during the seminar, allowing each pair of students to discuss their response before sharing with the entire group. If one of the pair habitually speaks less than the other, the facilitator can then request that one who has spoken less share with the entire group. These and similar strategies are ways of easing the shy student's entry into the flow of whole-group seminar discussion, where they learn to voice

their ideas—even in the most nascent form—with an extended group. The habit of expression leads, in this way, to having something to express.

Finally, there is the whole-group discussion of ideas among equals. For years we have taught the "Paideia Seminar" as "a collaborative, intellectual dialogue facilitated with open-ended questions about a text" (2009, 16). The paired goals of Paideia Seminar practice are intellectual and social development. In training teachers to lead Paideia Seminars, we stress that these two goals—learning to think and learning to communicate—are so deeply intertwined that they can only mature together. Students in a true Paideia Seminar are treated as equals, and the facilitator is "merely the first among equals" (Adler, 1984, 19). The stated goal is that all the students in the seminar circle participate actively by speaking thoughtfully as well as listening carefully to the comments of others. The facilitator's questions are

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more *maieutic* than Socratic, meaning that they are designed to assist students in articulating their own thoughts rather than to lead them to the preconceived thoughts of the facilitator.³ Ultimately, the goal of a Paideia Seminar is a dialogue in which the group identifies

³ For a full, research-based discussion of the maieutic elements of classroom seminars, see Pelusa Orellana's 2008 dissertation on *Maieutic Frame Presence and Degree of Quantity and Quality of Argumentation in a Paideia Seminar*.

and blends multiple points of view into a larger, more sophisticated understanding of the concepts under discussion. Needless to say, teachers need to develop their skills at asking maieutic as well as Socratic questions—often blending the two deliberately—while working with one, a few, or many students together.

As demanding as this sounds, the good news is that rigorous and generous conversation is a learned behavior, a set of thinking skills that can be studied and practiced—first in school and throughout life. From the perspective of teachers, if we are to teach thinking, we must respond to Adler’s implied challenge to actually teach skillful speaking and listening—consistently and deliberately by making discussion of all types a routine part of every classroom in the school.

Back to the Beginning

Let us revisit for a moment the school that we described in the introduction to this article. When the school day ended, we convened in the media center with the entire faculty to debrief our work from that day. During the first part of the discussion, we teased from the teachers who had observed the demonstration seminar that they found discussion slow and lacking in focus, that the students had been restless and perhaps the seminar had gone on too long, and even though the students seemed to enjoy talking about measurement, their comments were often off topic and they didn’t pay much attention to each other. All of which we admitted: learning to speak and listen well is slow as well as difficult; it requires constant practice, practice which these students had never really had before. We then asked them to reconsider for a few minutes the events they had witnessed during the seminar: how one habitually silent student had

opened up, if ever so briefly, in response to a genuine question; how another had heard her without seeming to and built out of her response a much more complex response. And how in the minutes that followed, other students had begun to ask each other questions and build on each other’s responses. By the end of the staff meeting, teachers were nodding and smiling and asking questions about how to design their own seminars. They had overcome their initial disbelief and expressed a willingness to give their students opportunities to converse.

If the school described in this article represents the first step a faculty might take in teaching their students to speak and listen, consider a school that is at the other end of that journey. The Chattanooga School for the Arts and Sciences in Chattanooga, Tennessee is a K-12 magnet school that began implementing the Paideia program in 1986 and is in its 22nd year as a Paideia school. Students at CSAS participate in full-dress Paideia Seminars at least once a week throughout the year. By the time they are seniors in high school, they are in their 13th year of regular seminar discussion. They are universally articulate and thoughtful, and what the staff says about their students goes something like this: “They may not have the best test scores but if they ever get an interview—whether for college admission, scholarships, or jobs—the competition is over. By far and away, they communicate better than anyone else the interviewer will see.” The implication is clear; it is possible to answer the challenge set for us by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. “All American [students can] be skilled at interacting competently and respectfully with others”—if we simply take the time and make the effort to teach them to do so.

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